

'Not enough cash' attack on benefits reform scheme

By JAMES NAUGHTIE

Voluntary organisations last night mounted an attack on a Government report proposing reforms in the payment of supplementary benefit — because it fails to call for extra resources.

It is the first review of the system to be published for 12 years, and recommends changes in the rules to simplify the payment of benefit by streamlining the process by which it is calculated.

But shortly after the report was released, a spokesman for Age Concern said: "This review fails because it starts from the false assumption that beneficial changes can be made without extra resources."

MAJOR STEP

The Child Poverty Action Group welcomed the proposals for reform, but agreed that more money was needed, and a Shelter spokesman said they were "very dismayed to think that there may be no extra expenditure."

The report has been drawn up, after two years, by the Department of Health and Social Security into the working of the system, and Mr Stanley Orme, Minister for

Social Security, described its publication as "a major step in open government." He hoped it would stimulate wide public discussion. The Government have not yet committed themselves to any of the recommendations.

The report points out that the supplementary benefits scheme was designed to help a small number of people, but now assists more than five million, almost one-tenth of the population.

EQUALITY

The officials say it is clear that expenditure on other schemes will not be possible on a scale needed to take large numbers off benefit, and therefore: "On any realistic assessment, the scheme will have to deal with large numbers of claimants for a long time to come; it is a safety-net into which many more people will fall than it was originally designed for. It needs to be much better adapted to this role."

They propose simpler ways of calculating benefit for short-term claimants; greater equality of treatment for married women, and a clearer legal fra-

mework, which would reduce the discretion used by local officials by defining more precisely the extra benefits available in particular circumstances.

Main benefit rates would be brought into line with National Insurance benefit rates, and new rules would mean that school-leavers would have their entitlement deferred until fixed dates at the end of the holiday following the term in which they left school.

Some of the proposals would result in savings in benefit and staff, but others would increase costs, they say. Since 1966, staff has increased from 12,000 to more than 30,000, and the number of recipients by more than half a million. Last year £1950 million was paid in benefit.

SOLUTIONS

The report dismisses claims that benefit levels are a common disincentive to work. "While there are undoubtedly cases where benefit levels can approach or exceed earnings, this acts as a disincentive in only a small proportion of cases. The solutions lie in

increasing the income of those in work, not in cutting the real value of benefits."

Commission officials believe that there will always be a number of claimants who would rather receive benefit and have a lower income than work at dirty, boring or frustrating jobs.

Another report is expected next week on the amount of benefit which goes unclaimed each year, something which the DHSS regard as a major problem.

DISCRIMINATION

In another plea to the Government on social security, Lady Howe, deputy chairman of the Equal Opportunities Commission, said that disabled housewives are facing discrimination because of the strictness of the test which they must pass to get invalid benefit.

She said the test — being able to do "normal household duties" — was being applied too harshly, and more than half those who appealed after failing it were shown to be eligible. She called on the Government to change the "cumbersome machinery" by which the benefit was assessed.

Jessica Barrett



It's a taxing time for battling Betty

THE NEWLY bereaved Emily Bishop wandered down "Coronation Street" handing out money to Deirdre Langton's little girl, making brave small talk with the neighbours, and angering Betty McAteer.

"So I phoned Granada and told them that Emily had a lot of problems in store for her and that she should be watching her money.

"And I hope you're not going to send her off on a recuperation holiday to Bermuda, I said, because after the shock of her husband's death she's going to get a big financial shock — at least that's how it is in real life.

"In fact, I told them that they could get a real tear-jerker of an episode out of Emily realising the way widows are treated in this country."

Granada didn't take Betty up on her script suggestion. But she's aiming for bigger things anyway — the European Commission on Human Rights in Strasbourg no less.

Deputation

Next Sunday at 2.30 p.m. she expects the little second-hand clothes shop at 29 Bank Street, Hillhead, Glasgow, to be packed to the pavement with battling widows and their supporters, as Betty — who has become an amateur financial adviser gives one of her counselling sessions.

She would like to see not a few MPs and local councillors. And the odd body from the Inland Revenue and the

Social Security would not go amiss, either. She wants to organise a deputation. Tax free widow's pensions are her chief aim.

"The widow in Britain is a nobody," she says. "She is penalised because her husband has had the cheek to die. In other Common Market countries widows are given all kinds of tax and income concessions.

Their children are given every opportunity. The European widow is given every assistance to build a new life for herself.

"Where's the great big British social conscience when it comes to her widows. It's nowhere to be heard. She's too busy

handling out to the layabouts and malingers.

Overburdened

"We are worse off than the unmarried mother or the unemployed. The only woman we call sister is the mother who has been deserted without maintenance. And let's face it, the divorced and separated can sue for maintenance."

Just in case anyone thinks Mrs McAteer and her sister widows are looking for big SS handouts and equal rights with married women with husbands, they're not.

Like so many of us — only their situation is much worse — they would like to get the Tax man off their already overburdened backs.

What the newly widowed

BETTY McATEER

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What the newly widowed don't realise is that the Inland Revenue vultures have been hovering over the corpse since it drew its last breath.

Different

"A widow starts paying The Tax man has been dies," says Betty. "As soon as the Inland Revenue gets its claws into her she can expect tax demands that run into hundreds.

"Goodness, I've got a wee cleaning woman who has been going home with £7 out of her £23 a week wage. The Tax man has been lopping it off her because they didn't recognise her as a widow for four years.

"But no two widows can be given the same advice," she says with a frown. "There is no general pattern. There are 11 different tax codes and these change from letter to letter. Very often they're wrong, too.

What most women don't know is that they are expected to pay tax on the 26 weeks earnings related supplement that they get on being widowed. The demand can come in months later or years later, but it comes. And it's an almighty blow for most of us.

"Women whose husbands are killed at work are even

worse off. They have to pay tax on as little as 55p industrial injury benefit.

"Is it any wonder we are sick and tired appealing to the Treasury?

Improve

"Well, we've had enough. We want our husband's pensions tax free and we want the right to go out and earn for our children.

"Our children's benefits are even taxed. If I sent my daughter to a foster home her new mother would be paid £30 tax free to look after her. It's all cock-eyed, isn't it?"

When Betty McAteer and her deputation get to Stras-

bourg it won't be to feather their own nests. It will be to improve the lot of her daughter and your daughter.

Until I spoke to Betty, a widow for five years, I did not know that widow's pension isn't a right. That Britain is full of widows who don't get a pension at all. They are either age barred or their husbands have been self-employed.

It appears that women have simply accepted the shroud of widowhood. That begging, appealing, and falling living standards have all been part and parcel of life without a wage-earner.

Well, the unmarried mother, the unemployed, the

**BETTY
McATEER**
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lazy, the foster parent, even the so-called single parent in a divorce, all have tax-free advantages and social security benefits, so why not the widow?

And if, as Betty MacAteer says they don't want sympathy and handouts, at least give them back their dignity.

It's time someone told our quaint, traditional Parliament that burying a wife with her dead husband went out with the pyramid builders.

Keep fit Janice fights for fatter pay

By BILL CORKE

SLIM gym instructor Janice Steele helps fatties lose weight.

But she claims her male colleagues' pay packets are bulging while she does the same job for a slimmer wage.

She complained to the Equal Opportunities Commission and yesterday they backed her fight for equal pay at an industrial tribunal.

Janice, 20, of 23 Glenacre Quadrant, Castlemilk, works at the Olympic Health Studios in Queen Street, Glasgow.

She told the tribunal that until June she only received a £1 bonus for getting bookings compared to £2 for men.

Bonuses are now the same, but male instructors on a basic wage can earn up to 75 per cent more than women, she claimed.

She was banned from working extra hours on men's days at the gym, but male workmates did overtime on ladies' days.

Her boss, Bob Sweeney, told her that men worked on ladies' days to keep drunks out of the studio.

"The company have good reason for men working extra hours on ladies' days to help protect the staff and customers," he said.

Once Janice worked an extra day, but was paid £8 less than the men's rate.

When she complained £57 was deducted from her pay, she said.

The tribunal are considering their ruling.



Janice Steele . . battle for her rights.

Slim gym Jan muscles in for more pay

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Janice . . . waits for ruling.

Janice flexes muscles over pay

By ANNE JOHNSTONE

JANICE STEELE reckoned she pulled her weight at the city gymnasium where she works as an "instructing person."

So when she found her male colleagues were getting double bonus payments for helping fatties fight their flab, she decided to take the matter up with the Equal Opportunities Commission.

And today, at an industrial tribunal, the Commission backed her fight against her bosses at the Olympic Health Studios to put her on the same footing as the men.

Janice (20), a qualified gymnastics instructor, of 23 Glenacre Quadrant, Castle-milk, told the tribunal that until June this year, her £1 bonus compared to £2 for men.

BARRED

Since then, she claimed the wage structure has been altered.

Bonuses are now the same but the men get up to 75 per cent. more as a basic wage.

She said she is also barred from working extra time because her employers won allow her in the gymnasium on men's days.

"That's not fair," said Janice, "because male instructors work on 'ladies' days'."

This is despite the changingroom arrangements at the Queen Street studios, which mean they might see something they shouldn't, she claimed.

On one occasion, said Janice, she was asked to work an extra day and received the men's bonus rate, minus £8.

DRUNKS

When she took the matter up with the company's accountant, £57 was promptly deducted from her wages.

When she wrote to the company's managing director, Bob Sweeney, he told her that males work on ladies' days to keep drunk men out of the gym and sell membership to ladies.

The letter said — "A girl would normally have some difficulty selling body-building to a man, as compared to a man selling slimming facilities to a woman."



Janice Steele

Woman
Times

Spotlighting a free service that starts in Glasgow tomorrow



Mrs
BETTY
McATEER

THE WIDOW'S CHAMPION

SCOTLAND'S estimated 30,000 widows are in 'These tax for a new deal — if 53-year-old Betty McAteer from Anniesland, Glasgow, has her way.

Worries when you can least cope

"PEOPLE are always asking me why I do this sort of thing," says Betty McAteer. "The answer is simple.

"I was widowed with two young children to bring up. My husband had a good job and thought he had left us well provided for. What he didn't know about was what I call the 'bereavement tax'—the impersonal, money-pinching system every widow must face and go through at a time when she is at her most frightened and saddest.

"It's taken me four years to sort out and understand the system completely... and even now I'm still learning.

"The least I can do is put my knowledge to good use and help as many other widows as possible.

"If there is anyone who would like to help me do this I'd be delighted to hear from them. The more people I can teach to understand the system the more widows can be helped. I'd like to see a network of T.A.C.'s set up throughout the country."

By
Margaret
Milne

Single-handed, Betty, who was widowed just four years ago, has faced, fought and won the battles which face every widow today.

"Nowadays," says Betty, "if you are a widow you also have to be a financial tax expert to cope with and deal with the taxation, pensions and allowances system.

"I had a rough idea what it was all about and I've had eight different taxation levels in four years. The frightening thing is that, legally, it's my responsibility to know how much tax I should be paying.

"If I don't know, and if there are any mistakes, I have to take the full responsibility for them. For many widows it's these 'mistakes' which can almost drive them to suicide when a back tax

demand drops through the letter box."

As many as three hundred letters a week arrive for Betty, who has now become known as the widows' champion.

On her desk recently was one devastating case — "It was a young widow who had three children to bring up. She took a job as a school cleaner earning £17 a week. The tax boys made a mistake in her coding and when they realised their mistake promptly sent her a demand for £500.

"With cases like this being brought to my notice almost every day I decided to set to work and do something."

Tomorrow Betty's "Something" becomes a reality when the doors of Scotland's first tax advisory centre Widows T.A.C. opens at 29 Bank Street, Glasgow.

Political

There Betty will be on hand to help widows deal with their individual problems and the service is free.

"But the important thing is that widows who are already in this frightening position must not panic," she says.

"They should write to the tax people immediately, saying that they are appealing against the decision — then get in touch with me at the new centre."

For many widows in Glasgow Betty McAteer has already brought them more than peace of mind. In one

'mistakes' can almost drive them to suicide'

case which Betty took up the widow is now £247 better off.

"Widows and anything to do with them is a political subject," says Betty, "but I'm not interested in politics. I haven't time. All I want is to see that every one of them gets what they are entitled to."

"The money is not a gift or charity, it's what their husbands have been paying for. They have to be told this and to stand up more for their rights. I want to show them how to do it and how to be more militant — but they can't be militant till they understand what they are up against."

"I had to threaten one tax official at Centre 1, East Kilbride, that I would write to Westminster to sort out one of my problems."

Frightened

"To help explain the general points I'm producing a leaflet which I would like to see in general circulation."

"I'd also like to hear from ministers and priests who are often called in by families to help calm down or sort out a widow's problems."

A warning to unemployed!

DOLE IS AN ARM OF THE POLICE

THE Department of Employment has revealed that it is helping the police to inquire into unemployed workers.

The relationship involves labour exchange officials handing over confidential information to police officers.

It means that unsuspecting workers, exercising their right to draw unemployment benefit, are in danger of police investigation, harassment and, not least of all, arrest.

A Workers Press inquiry into police infiltration of labour exchanges was started in October by reporter Stephen

BY THE WORKERS PRESS EDITORIAL BOARD

Johns after a young Irish worker was picked up in a west London labour exchange.

The young man was convinced that local department officials 'tipped him off' to Special Branch officers who seized him at the exchange on October 9.

The officers were in plain clothes and indistinguishable from the unemployed workers crowded in the labour exchange. They bundled him out a side door where an unmarked police car was waiting to take him to Caterham in Surrey.

The police attempted to pin the Caterham bombing on the youth and in the course of a six-hour interrogation session tried to link

his political activities in the Young Socialists to terrorism.

The youth had his finger and palm prints taken. He was photographed and his clothes taken away for explosives tests.

They asked him to be an informer (the soft line) while others threatened to beat him up (the hard line). After his ordeal he was released.

(The police still possess his fingerprints and his photograph. It was revealed in the House of Commons this week that the police have, in fact, the prints and mug shots of all the 1,150 people snatched under the anti-terror laws. The vast majority of these suspects were innocent and released. But the

police are keeping the data collected to build up a formidable dossier that can be used for wholesale political repression.)

On October 23 Workers Press editor Alex Mitchell wrote to Employment Secretary Foot to ask whether the police were operating freely within labour exchanges to harass and intimidate the unemployed.

In its reply, the department says it is 'satisfied that there has not been any breach of policy' regarding disclosures of information to the police.

How true. The department has carried out its policy to the letter; it confirms that information is secretly handed over to the police.

According to the 'policy', a police officer can telephone a labour exchange and ask for any information about an unemployed worker on the grounds of 'reasonable suspicion' and he will get a full dossier.

This confirms the Irish youth's worst suspicions, that details of his old address, employment and movements to and from the exchange were given to the Special Branch allowing them to set a trap.

This is an issue that must be taken up by all trades unionists. If this policy is allowed to continue, large sections of the working class are in danger.

Every week thousands more workers are driven on to the dole.

These workers will be processed by Department of Employment officials who can be made to turn into police informers under departmental rules.

When they draw their benefit they enter premises where policemen, disguised as the unemployed, operate unseen and unknown to the working class. The stage is now being reached where the labour exchanges are becoming a branch of the police force.

The condition that the crime must be 'serious' before confidential information can be released should reassure no one.

In the case of the Irish youth the police were investigating alleged offences under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. It is well known that police now use this police-state measure, passed by the Labour government, as a catch all for political harassment of wide sections of the population.

Are the Labour Exchanges to become part of this conspiracy against the working class and labour movement? It is up to the trade unions to stop this sinister use of the Department of Employment by the police and the Home Office.

● We reproduce the Workers Press Letter to Cabinet minister Foot and his department's reply.

Letter to Michael Foot and his reply prove it

Mr Michael Foot,
Secretary of State
for Employment,
Department of Employment,
8, St James's Square,
London SW1Y 4JB.

October 23, 1975

Dear Mr Foot,

One identified himself as Special Branch and a detective inspector. Two other police officers with two Ford 'Escort' cars were waiting outside the building. He was driven by car to Caterham police station and told he was being detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

We think it urgent that a full investigation of the scale of the involvement of your Department in this incident is undertaken.

Mr Melrose's statement poses several questions: How were the police able to arrest Mr Melrose precisely at the time he was drawing

DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT

MG D1

Almack House 26-28 King Street London SW1Y 6RB

Telephone Direct Line 01-214 8482

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Your reference

I enclose two articles from Workers Press which involve your Department. The incident they describe raises a matter of serious concern for the labour and trade union movement and not least the hundreds of thousands of workers who use employment exchanges and expect freedom from police harassment.

The incident involved an Irish youth named Robert B. Melrose who has been registered at the Lisson Grove Department of Employment, London NW1, for some months.

At approximately 2.20 p.m. on October 9 this year Mr Melrose went to Lisson Grove to collect his weekly unemployment benefit. He was asked to wait by a counter clerk because there was 'an inquiry' on his claim for benefit. About one and a half minutes later the supervisor, who we understand is called Mrs Irene Hazel, came to the counter, called out Mr Melrose's name in a loud voice and handed over an opened envelope which contained his Giro cheque.

As he turned to leave the exchange Mr Melrose was seized by two plain-clothes police officers and marched out of the building in the manner described in the Workers Press article of October 23.

Prevention of Terrorism Act.

He was given forensic tests, photographed and fingerprinted then interrogated for some seven hours. Mr Melrose says he was physically mistreated and offered payments by the police officers to act as an informer.

Attempts were made to make him 'confess' to involvement in the Caterham bomb explosions. Police also attempted to link the Workers Revolutionary Party with terrorism, Mr Melrose, who is not a member of the WRP but a member of the Young Socialists, of course informed the police that the WRP has nothing whatsoever to do with terrorism, arms or explosives of any description.

In the course of their questioning the police revealed they knew a) the amount of benefit Mr Melrose received; b) details of his past employment; c) that he had not informed the Lisson Grove office of his change of address.

Mr Melrose was released at approximately 10 pm. Police drove him back to his London address where they attempted unsuccessfully to carry out a search without a warrant.

Mr Melrose has had no further contact with the police and he has made a sworn statement to a solicitor regarding the incident.

the time he was drawing benefit?

Is it the practice to allow Special Branch officers to mingle among unemployed workers who are drawing benefit?

In this case, were any employees of your Department aware of the presence of the police officers before the arrests were made?

Did any of them observe Mr Melrose being taken away?

How did the police obtain information concerning Mr Melrose's past employment?

How did they know he had failed to inform the Department of his change of address?

How did they know the amount of benefit he received?

We think an inquiry into this incident is urgently required. More than a million workers are now forced to use the offices of your Department. The treatment of Mr Melrose poses a threat to all these people since it is a basic right to collect unemployment and social security payments free from police harassment or the threat of police harassment, infiltration and spying.

Yours sincerely,
Alex Mitchell
Editor, Workers Press.

Your reference

Our reference 1/UB 107 1973

Date 14 November 1975

Mr Alex Mitchell
Workers Press
186a Clapham High Street
London SW4 7UG

Dear Mr Mitchell

Thank you for your letter of 23 October addressed to the Secretary of State for Employment. I have been asked to reply.

The Department of Employment acts as agent of the Department of Health and Social Security in the day to day administration of the scheme for payment of unemployment benefit and we follow their long established policy in regarding as confidential information about individual claims for benefit. Such information is disclosed without the written consent of the person claiming benefit only where:-

- (1) it is clearly in his own interest to do so
- (2) to prevent duplication of payments of benefits from government funds
- (3) there is a specific legal requirements to do so or in court under subpoena
- (4) the police seek our cooperation in connection with the investigation of a serious crime.

My enquiries in this case satisfy me that there has not been any breach of this policy by the benefit office in the case of Mr Melrose. Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention.

Yours sincerely

J MORRIS

IT IS FRIDAY October 13, 1979; just a week after the passing of the Social Assistance Act, (1979), the Act which gave statutory blessing to the proposals outlined in the Supplementary Benefits Commission's review of its work, published in July, 1978.

The scene is your local social services office. You are the duty social worker for the day. The time is 2 pm, and you have just returned from a hasty lunch. You glance into the waiting room, and see that there are three people already there, though doubtless there will be many more as the afternoon wears on.

The first person to be seen is Mrs Higgins. She has never been to social services before, and she looks pale and tense, but controlled. She tells you that she left her husband on Monday, taking her two children (aged 14, 11 and seven) with her. There has been friction between them for years, and recently he has been telling her to go. She saw that the children were being affected. She looked for a flat for months, and finally found one, at £20 per week, unfurnished.

Her husband will go on living in their house with his elderly mother, and will only let her have the children's beds out of their original furniture. He is refusing to maintain her or the children.

When Mrs Higgins went to social security to claim for herself and the children, she was told that she came under the new short-term claims scheme. She would be paid £28.05 for herself and the children for the next eight weeks. If she was still claiming after that, she would qualify for the full scale rates. Mrs Higgins pointed out that she was paying £20 in rent alone — she had tried everywhere for a cheaper place, but it was impossible. The clerk pointed out that the new rates included a "standard rent addition" (he called it) of £6.95, which was the same for everyone, no matter what their family circumstances. Mrs Higgins pleaded with him, but he said this was now law, and could not be altered even on grounds of severe hardship to the children. It was no good appealing either.

Then Mrs Higgins asked him about furniture. They have no cooker, no table, no chairs, just the beds to sleep on. Sorry, said the clerk, under the new Act there is absolutely no possibility of exceptional needs payments under any circumstances during the first eight weeks of a claim. He could not suggest how she might be able to cook for her family, or how they were to live. Perhaps she should think about her decision to leave her husband, he said.

When she remained adamant, he suggested that perhaps the social services departments might be able to help. She has no idea what help is available from social services, but she is clear that she does not want the children received into care.

You feel helpless and rather stunned. You remember reading something about the supplementary benefits review over a year ago, but it all sounded quite reasonable then. You are sure that Mrs Higgins has got it wrong. There is rather a nice liaison man somewhere in the middle management structure of the social security office, and you always ring him up with your difficult situations. He often seems able to sort things out. So you ask Mrs

Social insecurity

Higgins to excuse you, and go to ring him.

He is polite and charming as always. No there is no mistake. The whole point about the new short-term rates is that they are to be standard, the same for everyone, no matter how exceptional or complex their circumstances. There just is no power to vary them, and none to give grants either. Parliament has decreed — it is illegal to do otherwise. Yes, this was exactly what the review had suggested, and no one of any importance had protested. The whole idea is keep the claim simple.

But surely, you protest, she will have to be assessed all over again in eight weeks' time, and have her rates changed around. It is not simple at all; it means being questioned and filling in forms twice over. Ah well, he explains, the SBC felt fairly certain that a large proportion of claimants would withdraw their claim some time during the eight weeks, so the re-assessment would not be necessary. For a moment, you lose your composure, and shout down the 'phone that you won't be surprised if most of them do withdraw.

He clears his throat politely, indicating that for the sake of the long tradition of good relationships with your department he is willing to overlook this lapse. You try again. Surely something can be done about furniture. He wonders whether your department or the WRVS have an old furniture store. If not, perhaps you had better get one soon, as quite a number of claimants may have the same problems as Mrs Higgins. You say that secondhand furniture is often very tatty. Suppose Mrs Higgins did survive for eight weeks, would she get furniture straight away? He couldn't commit himself. She couldn't even apply for it until she came onto the full scale rates, and then she would have to wait for a visit. Because the review had insisted that discretionary assistance was to be limited, the numbers of visiting officers were being restricted, and it could take several weeks or months.

You ring off, and return to Mrs Higgins. You try to explain to her, but your words sound stumbling and inadequate. As it dawns on her that there is nothing you can do, she dissolves into tears. You cannot comfort her; you feel guilty and useless. You know that your department's section money is severely curtailed, and it would take weeks to get anything for her. In any case, why should social services have to do what was always clearly a social security responsibility?

You take advantage of Mrs Higgins' state of shocked disbelief to hurry her out of the office. Next waiting to be seen is Darren Blake, aged eighteen-and-a-half. You recognise him straight away, because he used to be on your caseload. Poor

Bill Jordan, a lecturer in social work at Exeter University, takes a futuristic look at supplementary benefits

Darren had gone from bad to worse after the care order when he was 16. He had ended up in borstal about a year ago, you remember. He tells you that he came out last week — he still has that awkward look of someone who has just emerged from an institution where he has been drilled and disciplined. But surely, you ask, Darren is out of care now, and comes under the probation service?

Yes, he explains, but he is desperate, and the probation service say they can not help him. When he was in borstal, he trained as a carpenter, and got good grades in his tests. They allowed him home leave, and he managed to get himself a job in the town. He was supposed to start on Monday. But when he went to social security, they told him that they could not give him any help with tools or working clothes. The borstal staff had assured him that he would get grants for both; but social security told him there was some new Act that said he had to wait eight weeks before he could get anything more than the standard rate. His probation officer had checked, and it was true.

Darren tried to see whether the probation service could help, and found they did not have the funds. He looks pathetic. He is terribly keen to start the job and knows that it is his best, perhaps his only, chance of staying out of trouble. His mother has the other four children to manage and can not give him any help. As a desperate last try he has come to social services.

You tell him that you will ask your senior and will write to him, but you know that you are not being honest with him, and he knows it too. As he leaves, you feel instinctively that there is a bitterness and a hardness in him which will take him back to court, and on to prison.

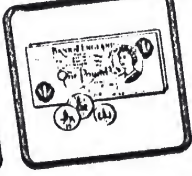
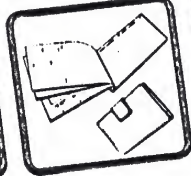
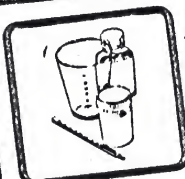
You need a cup of tea before you see anyone else. In the tea room you meet Sandra. You tell her about all the trouble you are having with social security since this new Act, and specially with these new rules about short-term benefits. She was on duty on Wednesday, and she had just the same difficulties over a young family in temporary accommodation and two people who had just come out of mental hospital. Sandra says it is terrible that no one knew what would happen before this Act was

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...ssed; but the social security people told r it was well publicised, and anyone uld have written in to object before it is even made into a Bill.

You go back to the waiting room. Next is rs O'Rourke. She has never been to clial services before either, but she has the ey complexion of a long-term claimant. e has five children, two of them under hool age, and she has been claiming for o and-a-half-years. She says that she can rldy keep her head above water, and that e always received grants for clothes for e children, because the social security ople knew she would not ask unless she lly needed them. This week she went in claim a grant, because the children's es were all worn out, and they just uld not go to school in them any longer. her astonishment, they said that they oger made grants for clothing, shoes or el. It was not allowed by law any more. e would be getting a grant of £26 every months, but the first one would not e till after Christmas.

Mrs O'Rourke had pointed out that in t just she had had grants of £50 and £70, d that £26 was hardly enough for a pair shoes each, let alone all the other clothes y needed. She just could not believe that y could get so menn. She argued for nt half an hour; then she said she would pent. The social security officer said that e was no right of appeal any longer, ept when the chairman of the tribunal

thought there was an "important principle" at stake. This was the final straw. Mrs O'Rourke stormed out, and spent the whole of her week's giro on shoes for the family.

Next day, she went into the office and told them what she had done. She demanded an urgent needs payment, because now she was completely broke, and had nothing to feed the children. It had been essential for them to have the shoes, and she could not see any other way through the red tape. It was a different clerk this time, and he was nastier. He said it was her own fault, and there was nothing he could do. The fact that she was destitute made no difference. The new Act stated that urgent needs payments were only for cases of fire, flood or money being lost. Her money was not lost but spent, and it made absolutely no difference what it was spent on. Again she said she should appeal. He told her that there was no longer a right of appeal against a refusal of an urgent needs payment, under the new Act.

Mrs O'Rourke pauses. She says she has tried everything — crying, begging, threatening to abandon her children, and it makes no difference. So she has come to ask for her children to be received into care. She has struggled and tried her best to bring them up, but she can not manage any longer. If this is what the state thinks of her, the state will have to do her job for her.

You try to think of something to say to

Mrs O'Rourke. The words taste like ashes in your mouth. She looks at you with more resignation than anger. She has spent all her bitterness and hatred. She exhausted with pleading. You leave her to go and consult with your senior. It takes some time to convince him that Mrs O'Rourke's story is true. He says that he will see Mrs O'Rourke himself. You are relieved, because there are by now many more people in the waiting room.

You struggle through the rest of the day. As you are about to leave, your senior asks to see you. He is with the area director, who is on the 'phone to the manager of the social security office. He has been discussing the O'Rourke case, and has got nowhere. Now he is protesting about the new Act, and its consequences. The manager is, as usual, urbane and composed. He reminds the area director of the SBC's invitation for all interested parties to write in about the proposals.

Individuals could write. Organisations could write. Professional associations and *ad hoc* groups could write. The address was provided in the review itself. But only a handful of letters were received, and most of them were muddled and inconsistent, concentrating on trivialities or missing the point. The SBC had mounted the review as an exercise in open government, and the public had failed to respond.

The area director puts down the phone, and looks helplessly at you and your senior. You all realise that a new age has dawned in social services.

The future need not be like this, if there is a sufficiently vigorous protest against the most objectionable features of the review's recommendations. The review itself is long and complex, and very cunningly obscures these consequences.

I suggest that you and your colleagues write in, making the following counter-proposals.

- That the element of discretion is *not* removed from claims for the first eight weeks. Flexibility to give extra help in exceptional circumstances must be retained.
- That the obligation to give immediate assistance in cases of urgent need is not defined by statute or by regulation, and is not confirmed to fire, flood or lost money.
- That exceptional needs payments are no more strictly defined or limited than at present, and are still available for clothes, footwear and fuel.
- That the automatic right of appeal against discretionary decisions, and specially against refusals of exceptional needs payments, is retained. The right of appeal should not be in any way curtailed.

Obviously, there are many more positive recommendations that you could make, and that I would urge upon you. But the most effective protests are always the simplest. Surely we as social workers can write on these points, and make a really strong stand.

The address to write to with your comments is: Mr A Palmer, Department of Health and Social Security, Room 537, New Court, Carey Street, London WC2A 2LS.

You have until the end of the year to send your comments. Why not sit down and write now? ■

Under the grille

Gavin Weightman

om regional headquarters in Bristol, a chauffeur-driven car arrives at the staff entrance to St Catherine's House, a five-storey building above the supermarket in a shopping precinct with the mean proportions of a small 1960s development. The waiting attendants guarding the staff entrance with wary obsequiousness are a sure sign that this is a civil service building: Bristol (South) social security office. Out of the chauffeur-driven car, steps David Donnison, chairman of the Supplementary Benefits Commission, sartorially incongruous in his white turtle-neck light sweater and dark wind-cheater among the sober-dressed men from the ministry. Donnison has been an academic most of his life (he was appointed chairman in 1975, when he was 49), and retains a visiting professorship at LSE. He is on a local office visit to the south western region, talking to staff, discussing the supp ben review, and getting first-hand experience of the way the civil servants work at ground level.

No attendants guard the public entrance to St Catherine's House. On the first floor the contributory benefits section: here you apply for sickness, invalidity, maternity, injury, disablement, widow and child benefits, and retirement pensions. The waiting room is carpeted, the chairs have soft seats and backs and the counter is open—something like a hotel reception desk. The floor above houses the supplementary benefits section for claimants A to Z (the K to Z section is on the floor above.) Here is no carpet in the supp ben waiting room, the seats are hard and the reception and interview cubicles fortified with glass windows—like post office screens. Above the glass, an iron grille reaches to the ceiling.

Between the manager's office on the top floor (where Donnison is now being offered coffee and some forthright opinion by senior personnel) and the iron grilles on the floors below, are the majority of the 269 staff of Bristol (South) office. It is an ILO (Integrated Local Office), and the four messengers, 42 clerical assistants, 135 clerical officers, 70 executive officers, 13 higher executive officers and two senior executive officers, are apportioned between the contributory and supplementary benefits sides. The majority work on supp ben.

Though this local office is just one of 500 outposts of a vast department with its administrative centre in Whitehall, it is not simply "typical." Each local area has its special problems, and in handling the complexities of social security from day to day each local office develops its idiosyncracies: there are even variations in practice between floors A to J and K to Z at Bristol

(South). But because all offices are part of a single department, there is a striving towards consistency, and a basic similarity in the way the work is handled.

On the supp ben floor A to J, there is no doubt this is the civil service. A messenger goes by with a trolley carrying a folder marked: "Mr Murphy, Absences Substitution, Temporary Promotion." The women clerical assistants take files to and from the ministerial grey filing cabinets. A clerical officer goes into the enclosed reception box—a door cuts it off from the interior of the office—which they call "the cage." If you peep through, you can just see the knees of claimants. They wait their turn, listening for a call over the public address system if they have an appointment, or watching the numbered indicator which ticks over to show who's next among those who arrived on spec and took a ticket from the machine.

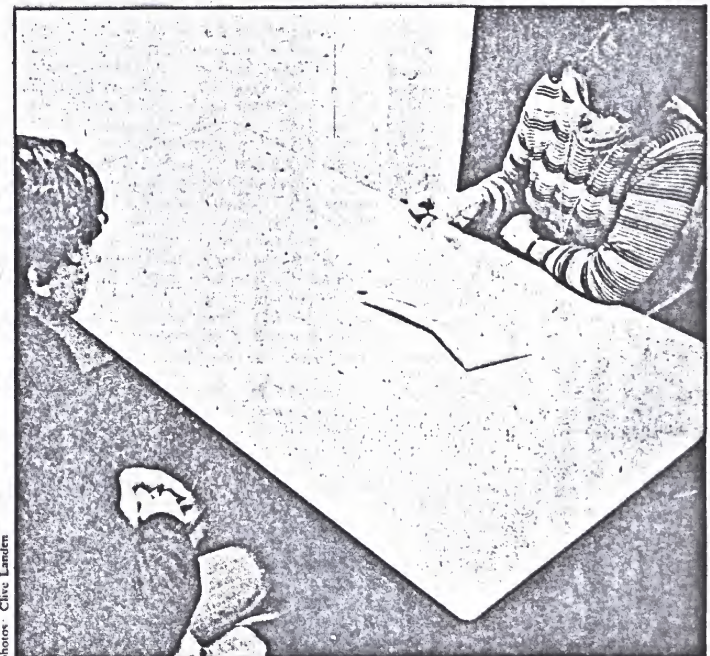
One or two clerical officers (cos) are in the interviewing cubicles, painted bright red. These are on the front-line "caller" section. Other cos stay safely inside, behind the fortifications, handling direct payments. One executive officer (EO) supervises the cos on caller section. Other eos have specialist jobs: visiting, unemployment review, fraud, liable relatives and so on. In charge of the various sections are higher executive officers (HEOs): for A to J callers and direct payments, there is one HEO they call the "floor manager."

Jeff Shorney is the supervisor on caller section. He is 23, and joined the civil service when he was 18, with two A levels.

The cos present him with tricky technical questions, and most of the time he has an answer. If not, it goes to Alan Clayton, the floor manager. If it's really exceptional—like "the dog's eaten the giro"—it may go to region, and possibly to Whitehall to be enshrined in the confidential book of rules, the notorious A Code now filling two black folders. The striving for consistency ends up on bits of paper, which cos sometimes forget about or don't have time to read.

There is the firemen's strike on, and today Jeff has been phoned by a station who want to bring a group of men down to be processed *en bloc*. He says it's just not possible. Clayton, as floor manager, says to lay on some extra booths next week. Though the rules about supplementary benefits for strikers are relatively simple, no two cases are going to be alike. With the firemen, Shorney at least knows they are on strike—there is no problem of checking to see which bit of the factory assembly line is out. But some firemen have mortgages, others pay rent, and the supp ben they get will reflect this. Their personal circumstances will vary a good deal.

A fireman comes in to be interviewed. The co, a girl, goes through the rigmarole of questions about holiday pay and part-time earnings and so on. The man says his wife should get £6 a week maintenance for the two children (by a previous marriage) but the order isn't paid, and the ex-husband is out of work. The co reads back Bristol (South): a private interview room (below), and refiling (overleaf)



photos: Chris Landem

ne statement, slowly—it could become a legally important document—and gets a declaration. "Is there anything else you would like to tell me?" The fireman is puzzled. "In what sense?" Silence. "What about child benefit?" "I give the children 10p a week each. I don't know why we do it. They've got about £1 each in savings." The co makes a note, then asks the fireman to wait.

Adrian Holmes, the liable relatives officer, comes in to speak to him. "She's passed it on to me because she's not too hot on court orders," he says briskly and pleasantly. What sort of court order is it? The number? Ex-husband's name and address? "If by chance he [ex-husband] pays his maintenance, that money belongs to this department."

The fireman asks if he will still get benefit after he goes back to work, because he won't be paid for three weeks. "I'm not sure about that," says Holmes. He checks with Shorney: "Yeah, that's right. When you report to work, you can go on claiming, but we claim that back when you are paid." When will he hear what he is to get? "The young girl is sitting down working it out now." The fireman gets £28.09: his council rent is £9.84, paid over 48 weeks, which has to be translated into 52 weekly segments to show the rent payable in benefit.

On each co's desk is an electronic calculator. Half an hour is allowed for each appointment on this floor (they do it a bit differently "upstairs") to allow the statement to be taken and the benefit calculated. Claimants are allowed seven minutes after their appointment time: after that, Shorney says, "We tell them to go away."

This case of the fireman shows that however straightforward the rules for payment of benefit, variations in individual circumstances can make it complicated. "Ask anyone in this building and they'll tell you simplification is one big joke," said one co. David Donnison—embroiled elsewhere in the building in an argument with staff about "incentives" and a return of the "wage stop"—has made simplification a central theme of the supplementary benefits review. The area of benefits he is concerned about is discretionary payments—not the intricacies of calculating entitlement to a flat-rate, means-tested benefit.

The cos refer all discretionary benefit claims to Shorney. He says, "If someone comes in and plonks her feet on the counter and says, 'I haven't got any shoes,' we say we don't give those claims over the counter. [They send a visitor to assess the claim.] The exception is when people are going back into work. A person says, 'I've got a job with McAlpines and I need a donkey jacket, a pair of boots and jeans to start work.' You have to decide that over the counter because of the urgency of the case."

Socially, the only people Jeff comes across who have claimed benefits are student friends who need something to tide them over the summer holidays. "I think that's fair do's," he says. He does have some symp-

athy with school leavers, who may have only five o levels. But only for a while. "There are jobs about. I don't think there's an excuse for living on supp ben for two years." Single parent families? "I must admit I do feel a bit sorry for them, though there's a lot with boyfriends who do help with payments for some time. But especially when you go on visits and see them, you do feel sympathy."

Jeff himself is married, and living with in-laws while he does up the house he's bought. He earns about £3,000 a year. His wife works in the fraud section. To get the house he had to do extra work, on Saturdays, and he does feel annoyed sometimes when he has to hand out lino, curtains, chairs, a three-piece suite, bedding and other furniture to someone on supp ben who moves into empty accommodation.

Jeff thinks the scale rates of supp ben are about right. "It's with the discretionary payments we err on the generous side." A woman co in her thirties agrees with that—"err on the generous side" is a popular phrase. She has worked in the office for four and a half years, and has been brought back to the caller section three times. "In the main, pensioners and people like them don't get a fair deal," she says. "But I think we pay some sections more than we should, and longer than we should—a single, unemployed layabout who makes no attempt to get a job and just sits about all day, those particularly."

Single parents? "Obviously, if someone has responsibility of a child their hands are tied. The country as a whole doesn't make provision for them to work. If they could get a job from 9 am to 3 pm, it would be different." She doesn't think there's much deliberate cheating, though a husband will sometimes leave home for a few weeks so the wife can claim. "Whenever I interview someone and I come in here and say, 'There's something not right about that one,' I think 'You'd better niggle.'" She might say to the other co: "I reckon he's got a bird and they're living together." She will put it down for an urgent visit. She says: "The cos are not allowed to ask, 'Are they sleeping together?' We're allowed to ask if they are sharing a common table and purse. But only an co can ask if they are sleeping together." (The commission has now changed the guidance on this, so that no direct questions about sexual involvement are asked.)

Both she and Jeff thought the glass screen and iron grille were absolutely necessary. "I worked here when there was just glass and they came over the top," says Jeff. His woman colleague says: "I've worked with the gaps and people come through. One punched me on the chin." Why? "I said no. We're the end of the line aren't we?"

Upstairs, in the fraud section, there is a more ponderous atmosphere. Smith, the HEO in charge, is a Bristolian and knows the area pretty well. "Over there is the old part of Bedminster, with houses divided into bed-sitters—always grist to the mill." He doesn't feel any personal antagonism to those who

try to cheat. "They're nice people the earth, but the sort who will do can to get away with things." In office, a message scribbled on a paper torn from a notebook is tucked into the box of files on Andy Fisher's desk. It does all the "indoor" sleuthing in the office. The note says: "Private. You should Mrs. . . . They all wonder where she's got the money. Send a woman." It's which is a bit unusual. Nearly all the fraud office get come from and letters and phone calls from the pul-

Bristol (South) office is notably full at bringing cases to court: 120 a week. But Andy insists that it isn't easy got to establish that a claimant has made a false claim, and with the ruling to different benefits being so you've got to allow for genuine. The fraud section covers both sides: contributory and supp benefits—regards—the amount that can be claimed by the claimant or wife without affecting the benefit—are particularly tricky; Welfare disregard now on sickness benefit doesn't know, nor does a colleague to be £8. He checks with the relevant section, which has to look it up. It's not What about invalidity benefit, sur disregard has gone up? He checks. Yes, the wife used to be able to claim now its £40.10p.

Chris Lilly, a colleague of Andy's in the fraud work: "It's a job where we serve more in the other person's position. We sit there and ask 'Well, what do you think?' " Andy says: "If I can't understand it, then I close the case. If it's simple for me to understand, then it's done." Graham Day, the other co on fraud, says: "If you want my honest opinion, I don't like this job that I enjoy. You have to be careful under Judges' Rules."

The real fraud sleuthing—hanging out in the night or early morning to catch a fiddling claimant—is not done by the Special investigators from the region. It's over if the fraud section doesn't have enough to go on. While we are talking, police court officers come in: they bring summonses for the fraud office in the district. They can sometimes be a source of information too. "Someone pays off a claimant, say, in £100 cash," says Andy. "I'll put it on supp ben. 'Where did he get the money?' " Andy pauses, spits in his hand and points at Graham. "Visit!"

Andy produces a scrap book with cuttings of court cases. It's to show that they do get some publicity on the grounds for fraud.

The day after Donnison's arrival, from two visiting officers (co graduates came in as graduates, that all the the office is about how the commission chairman doesn't wear a tie and a language. In another office, an HEO referring to the behaviour of a claimant: "I tell my girls that if anyone starts and blinding they should walk away. It's absurd that people with such delicate abilities should be put in the front line rescuing some of the most down-

of society. Yet, quite often, those who work on the "caller" section like the "face" contact with the public. They are the first line, where the enemy may at anytime come "over the top" or "through the hole."

Within a civil service department like the DSS, people move about from one section to another in their crawl up the promotion ladder. The manager may have come up the contributory benefit side, and have no experience of supp ben. Before he might have been in the Admiralty. The new HEO on fraud may have come from sickness benefit. And very often now, the girls on caller section (the great majority are women) will have very little experience at all. They won't have visited claimants—you have to be 21 before you can do that. And with a turnover of staff of maybe 30 per cent a year, as CUs get married, or become pregnant, or leave for less harrowing jobs, there is very little expertise.

At regional HQ, Donnison had given a press conference in which he explained what he was doing in Bristol. He pointed out that the commission does not employ anyone in social security, and has a general brief to see that people get what they are entitled to. He mentioned incidentally that there might be nearly 1,000,000 unclaimed benefits. This unexceptional statement found its way onto radio and in the newspapers and reverberated through the social security offices, right down to Plymouth HEO. When I got there, one HEO was consumed with anger. "I boil when I read Donnison's statements," he said. "It's just stimulating the appetites of the wrong ones." It was felt, too, that claimants were being encouraged while social security staff were being cut back. And there was the comment: "What right have we to force benefits down people's throats? If they've got pride they are entitled to it."

In its decor, the Plymouth office, with a staff of about 250, is less daunting than Bristol (South). Here, too, supp ben is divided into two floors, A to J and K to Z. The whole place is being refurbished, and on the supp ben floor that has been done out the reception area has been carpeted. The interview booths are painted white. The glass screens have a hole in them and there is no grille (though the reception counter has one.) Decisions about office furnishing can be taken unilaterally by a local office manager, though he may not be thanked by staff for making it brighter for claimants.

Last year, the turnover in junior staff at Plymouth was 50 per cent. One of the HEOs told me: "Most of the girls come from school. The average experience is about twelve months. This is one of the big differences from the old National Assistance Board. In those days, if a new member of staff arrived, it was an event. Nowadays we get people so inexperienced they don't know the answers. You get cos who know people only as a "casepaper," a thick file. If you tell them to visit, they come back and say, 'I really felt sorry for them.'"

Among the older staff, there is a good deal of nostalgia for the NAB days, when there was much more discretion. David Full,

now an HEO with responsibility for liaison with social workers and other outsiders—a job he does with a certain missionary zeal—remembers: "I can go back to the days when I had an area in Plymouth and said to old age pensioners, 'Do you take milk with your evening tea?' If they said yes, I would give them a bit extra for it."

Full now spends his time as a "trouble shooter" and public relations man for the Plymouth office. If the views of the girls down on one of the caller sections are any guide, he's got his work cut out. They themselves don't like to say to people socially that they work on supp ben. They'd be called "The nabs" or "The ss." As far as claimants were concerned, their chief pre-occupation was the idea that nearly everyone was better off on supp ben than when they were working. They wanted to see the "wage stop"—which sets the limit of benefits no higher than previous earnings—brought back. Several who were married said that if they themselves didn't work, their husbands earned so little the family would be better off on supp ben. Whether or not this was true—it's not a simple calculation as you have to allow for benefits, available to low income earners, which many don't claim—it was a strong belief.

In the Plymouth fraud section, Brian Bovey, who was 29 years in the Fleet Air Arm before he joined the civil service, had quite a different view of the public image of social security officers. Bovey always tells people he works in supp ben, and finds it a good topic for a pub conversation. "I think

we can do a great deal of good discussing generalities," he says. A popular myth he knocks down is the one that says you can get a discretionary grant for a colour TV—or the ingenious variation which says that if the TV has doors on it, it is counted as furniture and then you can get it.

The complexities of supp ben inevitably feed the myths which surround it, and confirm one or other of the popular views—that it is too hard or too soft. Nearly everyone believes that it should be simplified, with discretion reduced, though not all those working in supp ben offices would agree to the corollary that the basic scale rates should be raised to allow for this. About half of all appeals to ss tribunals involve discretionary grants. Even those, like Jeff Shorney, who see discretion as part of the satisfaction of the job, would like it reduced. But even if it is, administering the scheme will remain immensely complicated. And, at the end of the day, there will still be claimants who commit the indiscretion of coming back to ask for more. The supp ben office will still be at the "end of the line."

Some way will have to be found to intervene between the rather demure world of the civil service, and claimants who, for one reason or another cannot cope. At 3.30 pm the A to J floor of Bristol (South) reception shut. A woman and her baby, well known to the staff, refused to go. The lights were turned off in the reception area and they were left in the dark, while the clerical officers tidied up their addition and subtraction. The end of the line had closed.



Our Side of the Counter

What is it like to work in a social security office? It is an experience shared by more than 56,000 people – mostly very young and fairly new to the Civil Service.

More than 25,000 work in supplementary benefit offices or in the supplementary benefit side of "ILOs" (Integrated Local Offices) which cater for all social security benefits. This is just double the number there were when the Commission superseded the National Assistance Board in 1966, and with a turnover of 15 per cent a year (probably neither better nor worse than most large employers experience) more than 5,000 staff have to be recruited and trained annually.

There is probably no such thing as an average local office – each has its special characteristics and problems – and they vary from the very small ones like Berwick and Penrith, with a mere 20 staff or so, to big city offices with 250 or more. There are at present 334 ILOs, 168 national insurance offices and 90 supplementary benefit offices.

The Department's aim is to complete a network of 460 ILOs supported by 700 public enquiry offices before 1980. Over 200 offices have moved into new premises since 1966 and improvements have been made to most of the remainder. Standards of furnishing have been raised and carpets are beginning to make their appearance in the public reception areas as well as in the staff's.

£720 million

In the year 1972/3 local offices dispensed £720 million in supplementary benefits alone: £280 million to 1.8 million pensioners, and £440 million to 800,000 recipients of supplementary allowances. This means that an "average" office authorises payments totalling some £30,000 a week to 4,390 pensioners and 2,180 other claimants, of whom 700 will be unemployed, 600 lone mothers, 640 sick or disabled, and 240 others.

Over 500 people will call at the office in a typical week, 150 to make a new claim for benefit. About 150-200 of the callers will only need to see the reception officer to report a change, or make an enquiry, 200 will come by appointment and the remainder will receive an immediate interview. Five or six clerical staff will be required to man the counter, which is open from 9.30 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. continuously. They will assess most of the claims they take (a minority will need a visit first) and pass them to their Executive Officer supervisor for checking and authorization and then on to the Finance Section for issue of a Giro or order-book. About 100 Giros will be sent out to claimants who have called and who need an immediate payment.

Visiting officers

There will be seven or eight visiting officers, of whom two or three will be Executive Officers and the rest Clerical Officers, and they will make up to 30 visits a week each. The Executive Officers visit



Inside one of our Midlands local offices.

Photo: Courtesy of West Midlands Press Ltd.

new claimants and make follow-up visits at approximately six-weekly intervals in cases where there may be special difficulties. Clerical Officers visit in straightforward cases and other cases where follow-up visits are considered necessary, at intervals of 7 to 26 weeks.

Each visiting officer assesses the claims he takes, which then go through the same process as claims made at the office. Visiting officers do not have personal case loads. As far as possible they work in distinct "sub-areas" but the constantly changing demands to which local offices have to respond nowadays means, unfortunately, that claimants are unlikely to have the same visiting officer over a long period.

A large part of the office's work is concerned with maintaining the "live load". Order-books run for 26 weeks and new ones are issued on a regular cycle and when a change in the rate of benefit occurs. Our typical office will send out 450 new books every week.

Among the 1,100 weekly items of post, nearly 500 will report changes of circumstances, each requiring the casepaper to be extracted from the file (or traced if it is in action) and a decision made about the action necessary, and in most cases a payment or change of payment follows. 60 to 70 "postal review" forms will be sent out to pensioners and other long-term claimants and 50 or 60 of the previous week's will come back, enabling the rate of benefit to be confirmed or changed if necessary. The remainder will have to be visited.

Lump-sum payments

About 40 lump-sum "Exceptional Needs Payments" will be made each week,

averaging nearly £14 each. About half will go to pensioners and most of the remainder, and especially the larger amounts, will go to the much smaller numbers of lone mothers and families of unemployed men.

It is not always realised that social security offices do not have a budget, like many other authorities, limiting their expenditure to a predetermined amount. Parliament, through the Supplementary Benefit Acts and Regulations, and the SBC, as the determining authority, decide the entitlement of claimants and the local offices issue Giros or order-books accordingly, against the funds provided by Parliament. But the huge sums of public money disbursed necessitate strict financial control within the office, and all offices are subject to scrutiny by the Department's own auditors and the Exchequer and Audit Department which reports to the Public Accounts Committee of Parliament.

Mistakes are made, of course, but overall, under-payments and over-payments of benefit tend to balance each other. When under-payments are discovered, however, they are made good, whereas it is comparatively rare for a supplementary benefit claimant to be asked to refund an over-payment.

Instructions

There is a constant flow of instructions from SBC Headquarters – the famous "Codes". Some result from changes in policy, which will be made public. The great bulk, however, are intricate technical instructions necessary to ensure the precise co-ordination of operations, which concern not only the 400-odd local offices but may also involve other parts of the national

(turn to page 4)

Letters to the Editor

From R A B Leaper, CBE,
Professor of Social Administration,
University of Exeter.

I was delighted with the first issue of *SBC Notes and News*. Please may I have 20 copies for distribution to our post graduate social work students studying the work of the SBC as part of their course.

I think it would be a good thing if in future issues a little more space was taken to give careful consideration to one or two of the more controversial aspects of the Commission's work. You might well extend, for example, the paragraphs on cohabitation, wage stop and benefits statements.

From Frank Field, Director,
Child Poverty Action Group.

In your editorial note to the first edition of *SBC Notes and News* you write that you would welcome readers' views on its usefulness.

(continued from page 3)

insurance, industrial injuries, family allowances and FIS machinery – to say nothing of arrangements for welfare foods, butter and beef coupons, rent and rates rebates and the schemes of many other authorities whose clients may be able to claim supplementary benefit.

Change is the order of the day in every local office. Every time Parliament changes the rates of benefit a massive operation is necessary to bring out every single case-paper, reassess the benefit, and issue new order-books, many of which will be partly at the old and partly at the new rate. This work has to be done to a great extent in overtime.

Similar large-scale exercises are needed whenever local authority rents or rates are changed. In many offices the majority of claimants are local authority tenants and there may be several authorities all with different rates in one office's area.

Management is consequently largely concerned with ensuring that staff are constantly deployed to meet the pressures of the moment, so as to ensure that payments go out on time and that arrears of work, which would mean delay for claimants, do not build up.

The Manager is responsible, through a "Group Manager" to the Regional Controller, for the effective running of the office, and a system of management by objectives has been introduced over the last few years, involving managers at all levels from supervisor to Regional Controller in systematic efforts to improve the quality and efficiency of the Department's service to the public.

Independent survey

The best efforts of management and staff obviously do not result in satisfaction for every client. Although, in a recent independent survey of a small sample of the supplementary benefit clients of a fairly typical office in a provincial city, nearly three-quarters said they were "broadly satisfied" with the service, and a third of the supplementary pensioners said they

In principle CPAG feels that the Notes could perform a very useful function indeed, and applauds the Commission's decision to publish them. However, I must admit we were rather disappointed by the first edition.

Our main criticism is that the Notes devote too much space to those changes which have already been announced publicly (e.g. the changes in the statutory scale rates and in heating allowances) and too little to internal policy changes. It is the latter which we feel need to be publicized more.

We would also recommend that the Notes could be used to help clarify some of the more confused areas of Commission policy, for example the assessment of squatters for benefit which causes confusion on both sides, and to go into greater detail about some of the areas that are given only cursory treatment in the *Supplementary Benefits Handbook*.

were "very satisfied", one claimant in nine was "very dissatisfied". Among the dissatisfied group there was a marked preponderance of supplementary allowance claimants (i.e. those below pension age). The three major causes of dissatisfaction recorded were the level of benefit awarded; disallowed claims, particularly for discretionary payments; and lack of adequate explanation about awards and entitlement.

When complaints about the award of benefit are made, new facts are often brought to light which enable the local office to revise the original decision to the claimant's advantage but, in the average office, about one case a week will go to the appeal tribunal and the tribunal will revise the Commission's decision in the claimant's favour in about one case in five.

The experiment mentioned in the note on "Benefit Statements" (page 1) should go some way towards finding remedies for the complaint about lack of explanation. But for many of our clients, explanations and advice from another trusted source will always be of value, and we hope that *Notes and News* will help its readers to fill this important role.

Rent sharing

When the requirements of a householder are being calculated a share of the rent is usually attributed to any member of his household who is not dependent upon him.

In practice, this is calculated on a proportionate basis with each adult in the household counting as one unit and each child under 16 as a half-unit. However, when it appears that the non-dependant's circumstances are such that he cannot afford the amount attributed to him under this arrangement, the share is modified.

The method of deciding whether modification is appropriate in an individual case has recently been revised. As from 7th April a non-dependant's rent share is limited if necessary to an amount which will leave him, from his estimated earnings, not less than £10 if single or £17 if married, plus £4 for each dependent child.

Reception Centre relations with the community

There are 23 SBC Reception Centres throughout the country providing temporary accommodation where single people "without a settled way of living" may be influenced to lead a more settled way of life. These are used by more than 1,700 people every night.

It is only to be expected, however, that when a proposal is made to provide facilities for a group of disadvantaged people in a new place, there should be a local reaction – usually adverse. Some 18 months ago this became particularly evident in some areas where decisions to build reception centres had recently been confirmed.

Also about this time two new centres were shortly to be opened in places where opposition which had arisen when the projects were first mooted seemed to have died down and nobody locally was showing much interest.

Liaison Committees

The Commission felt that something positive needed to be done not only to counter any adverse reactions as they arose but also to counter apathy and try to obtain the active support of the local communities for the reception centre service. They therefore decided to set up for each new reception centre what have since become known as Community Liaison Committees (CLCs) to serve as a two-way channel of communication between the local community and the centre and its users.

Each of these committees would consist of a small number, say six or seven, of local opinion leaders – workers rather than professional committee-men (or -women) – plus the centre Manager. They will not have any responsibility for the management of the centre but they will meet, with officials present, at regular intervals to discuss ways in which the centre might be useful to the community and vice versa.

Exhibition Unit

So far only two of these committees are actively at work, but there are already grounds for cautious optimism about the concept. One good idea put forward by one of the committees was that they should exhibit along with other "social service" organizations at their local show, which annually attracts about 40,000 visitors. As a result, at the request of the Commission, the Central Office of Information produced for the occasion an exhibition unit describing briefly the work of reception centres and the function of CLCs.

The unit was however designed to be used anywhere in the country and, with the co-operation of the local authority, which we gratefully acknowledge, has already been displayed for a week in the London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in connection with the recent opening of the Notting Hill Centres for which a CLC will shortly be set up.

Life on the dole



WHY DOESN'T the state let people out of work starve to death? The welfare state is very humanitarian, of course, and its provisions are partly the product of long struggles by the labour movement. But the pool of unemployed workers is actually important to capital. They are there to compete for jobs with those who have them, to keep wage rates down.

But if we have social security, why doesn't it afford a decent living to its recipients? Because they might lose the incentive to work. This incentive is considered most important: to maintain it, the SS system does not simply keep claimants living at, or even below, subsistence level, but has constructed a whole range of devices for making unemployment unpleasant in every way; devices intended to force people off their books, and back into low-paid, often un-unionised work.

So claimants are subjected to constant humiliation and harassment. In DHSS offices they are abused, often refused benefit; when they get it, benefit is often less than they should be entitled to, and is often delayed.

The unemployed are to be socially classified as the "undeserving poor". This distinction from the "deserving", such as old age pensioners, is preserved also by the constant ideological attack on "scroungers", which serves the DHSS well, and by

the huge range of discretion allowed to SS officers in awarding benefit. Discretion makes those who get additional benefit "deserving" and sets them apart; it allows them to feel they are fortunate individuals—not part of an oppressed class. Dividing the working class is what the welfare state is all about.

Another part of bourgeois ideology that the DHSS reinforces is discrimination against women. Sexism permeates the whole SS system, through and through. It is in fact *official*: the Labour Government's Sex Discrimination Act specifically exempted the DHSS. "Carry on discriminating" was an order.

The system is working well. Over the last two years the economy has succeeded in shedding 1.5 million workers. Britain now has, in the eyes of international capital, an acceptably large reservoir of unemployed, *for good*. That's what the IMF achieved, with the complicity of the official labour movement.

On these pages *The Leveller* launches an examination of the welfare state machine. We expose ways the DHSS outlines the ways women are discriminated against; we describe the phoney appeals machinery in the supplementary benefit system, and how "discretion" works; we talk to the unemployed; and we look at the Claimants Union itself—the people who are fighting back. In future issues we will be continuing this theme.

Claimants



WOMEN

'I sometimes slept with my boyfriend'

There are millions of women dependent on Social Security. The large majority of claimants are women, and there are millions more who don't appear in the statistics since they are merely considered the 'dependents' of male claimants. Millions more are struggling to make ends meet in low-paid jobs, getting even less than they would on SS. Some of these have tried to claim, but have given up because of hostile treatment down at the DHSS.

Society oppresses and discriminates against women in many ways using them as unpaid labour in the home, and cheap and expendable labour outside it, and the SS system both reflects and reinforces this oppression. It is not just a matter of discrimination based on vague prejudices, amenable to reform. The discrimination is *official*. The 1975 Sex Discrimination Act specifically exempts the DHSS. The government that makes a great song and dance about women's equality actually encourages and sanctions discrimination on the part of one of its own ministries. When the Act was drafted, the discrepancies between its theory, and DHSS practice, was noted, and the response, rather than change the practice, was to change the Act.

The Supplementary Benefits Commission, in its latest annual report, approves in principle the EEC moves towards the system of equal maintenance for men and women, regardless of marital status, but the likelihood of implementation in Britain is remote.

Women are conditioned to their dependent status and often feel that they have little choice but to resign themselves to it. Women whose dependent status suddenly changes, as with many who go to refuges for battered women—often feel the shock of punishment that the DHSS metes out to them.

"I definitely wouldn't have given it another go with my husband if it hadn't been for the money ... I could have known it would have

been a disaster from the start, but every time John, my son, went home to visit his Dad he'd start complaining about what he couldn't have back at home with me ... he would wonder why he didn't get the same pocket money as before and he wouldn't understand that I had to crawl for every penny to the SS."

The Social Security system does not accept that women may remain financially independent from men. The "cohabitation rule" is the most notorious and punitive example of its dealings in this respect.

The cohabitation rule is a provision of the 1966 Ministry of Social Security Act, "where a husband and wife are members of the same household their requirements and resources shall be aggregated and shall be treated as the husbands and similarly unless there are exceptional circumstances, as regards two persons cohabiting as man and wife."

The Commission have a list of criteria upon which they are supposed to base their decisions. But there is no official definition of 'cohabitation', and in fact many women are consequently led to believe that they can have their book taken away simply by having a man stay the night with them, which is not actually true. The criteria are contained in its secret 'A' and 'AX' codes. But in fact, as far as the actual working of the rule, it is evidence of sexual relations, or that a man spends three nights or more on the premises, that is given priority—certainly over and above any evidence of financial assistance by the man.

One claimant who recently contacted a local Claimants Union had her benefit suddenly cut just after her baby was born and the DHSS only admitted after many phone calls by the claimant and the CU that they had cut her benefit because they 'suspected' cohabitation. They would not pay anything until the claimant, who had given birth 6 days previously, came up to the office to speak to the 'liable relative officer' (who is responsible for looking into the possibility of cohabitation). He was not there at the agreed time, and it was only by refusing to move that any interim payment was made at

all, to cover a bank holiday weekend. The DHSS's sole evidence for cohabitation was that a male friend in the multi-occupied house had helped the claimant with her claiming difficulties, by making some phone calls and going to the office with her, around the time she was having the baby.

The DHSS seem to make a habit of cutting off a claimant's benefit without informing the claimant of the real reason—presumably hoping that if claiming a benefit is hard and humiliating enough a woman will be forced into either financial dependency on a man or into a low paid job.

On April 7, Ms A's payment book was not returned and when she contacted the DHSS she was told that the book was being altered and was in the post. Three months later she still hadn't received her money. In fact the local authority Social Services department had been informed of the real reason: alleged cohabitation; but the duty social worker had been instructed that the reason should not be conveyed to Ms A, and that she should remain under the impression that the delay had been caused by adjustments having to be made to her book. When Ms A, who lives in Bristol, found out the real reason for her non-payment she appealed. Until the tribunal met she received no payment, and her children had to go hungry. When it eventually met—three months later—the DHSS evidence was practically non-existent and Ms A won her case. But three months after that, she has still received no money.

"I shared a flat with my boyfriend, although we were financially independent, and I wasn't allowed to claim. After a 10 month fight I finally was considered as a single independent person, but was refused back pay. SS home visitors hid behind my garden wall for 10 consecutive days, questioned the postman, milkman and neighbours—and all the personal observations were written in my file. It was awful to suddenly find that I was considered an undeserving scrounger who should be automatically dependent without any rights because I sometimes slept with my boyfriend."

It becomes clear that the cohabitation rule works to push women into a dependent relationship with a man, in fact—into cohabiting, often unwillingly. "Your private life is not your own when you're on the SS ... was told that I had to tell them everyone that came to stay with me" (Ms O) The assumption underlying the rule is that an emotional or sexual relationship entails financial dependence. Not only is this not so in many cases, but women in the CU movement feel strongly that it should not be so. It is both degrading and insulting. It presupposes that a woman can never be independent in her relationship with a man.

The cohabitation rule is a method of punishing a woman who wishes to stay out of the nuclear family. It also prevents women claimants relating to men on a free and equal basis. It leads to severe emotional and economic distress and encourages abuse by SS officials who are able to impose their own "moral standards".

Another way the SS forces women into dependence is by the "head of the household rule". Although on the whole it is women who are expected to care for children, take responsibility for household bills, and so on, they are not allowed to claim SB for themselves or their children.

Even when a woman is accepted as head of the household, as in the case of an unsupported mother, she is still likely to be harassed. The DHSS want as many women as possible to take

out affiliation or maintenance orders against the fathers of their children. All the money received under an order is deducted from the woman's SB.

Some women are happy to take out orders, but others want to exercise their right to be independent of the father of their children. The DHSS try to intimidate such women into action. They can't force them, legally, to take their husbands or boyfriends to court, but they can threaten to stop the benefit of "unco-operative" women.

If the women refuse, the SS sometimes take out orders against the men themselves. To do this they have to investigate the relationship an unmarried mother may have had with the man, which involves detailed questions about their sex lives.

A woman may well feel bitter about a man who left her pregnant, or alone with children, but she gains nothing by playing the SS game in hounding him. She receives no extra money, and many men do not earn enough to maintain their children, especially if they are supporting two families. A man's obligation to maintain his wife, or woman, and children, when they can be supported independently, can result in long term poverty and bitterness. A man can be imprisoned for three months, or fined, but this helps no-one. All it does, from the state's point of view, is to reinforce the idea that women should be dependent.

Women in the Claimants Union movement demand:

- an end to the cohabitation rule
- no deduction of family allowances from supplementary benefit
- financial independence for women, in or out of the home, without a means test
- removal of the head of the household rule
- realistic maternity grants for all women
- abolition of inequality in pension and National Insurance entitlements, and all other forms of discrimination against women.
- a guaranteed adequate income for everyone, in their own right: *men and women alike.*

That date was 29 March last year, when Dave Southwell, of Bristol, who has two dependents, a wife and a child, signed on. He received his benefit (£21) on 3 April. As is the DHSS's custom, that was a week's money in advance. That was *illegal*. But every single claimant since 1966 has been paid in the same way.

The Department has got away with it because the information on the print-out that accompanies the first Giro is deliberately misleading. It tells the claimant of the "Payment now due"; it also prints the date of the claimant's last signing on as available for work. The implication is that the payment dates from then, but it does not: all benefits are paid in advance.



The DHSS reply is that the system works out fairly because claimants get an extra week (or some days) benefit when they stop claiming. Well, some may. But in the High Court this was found to be an unsatisfactory reason anyway, because the Act imposes an obligation on the DHSS to pay supplementary benefit from the date when a person shows himself to have inadequate resources to meet his needs.

Swindle number two takes place every November, when higher benefits normally come into effect. Last year the date was 15 November. The Regulation (under the Act) instructed the DHSS to pay out the rises from that day. They didn't. They paid them from the date of the claimant's next Giro, which could have been up to five days later.

Dave Southwell appealed against the level of benefit he got on 20 November. And the Bristol SB Tribunal (which had ruled against him in the earlier case and driven him to appeal to the High Court) found in his favour. Again, the law was so clear that the DHSS couldn't appeal against it.

So what did they do? Did they pay out the difference to all the 2.9 million SB claimants affected? Or at least agree to change their procedure in future? You bet your benefit they didn't! They drafted statutory instrument no.1141, which slipped through Parliament, unnoticed, just before the end of the session in July. This regulation nullifies the Tribunal decision and legalises the practice of



paying the increases *after*, not *on* the date they come in.

For good measure, they threw in the other case as well. So it is now legal for them to pay benefit when they happen to get round to it. They also amended the existing regulations to make things more difficult for claimants in other ways, like allowing some decisions to be given only verbally, so the claimant won't have a document on which to base a possible appeal.

It's much too late to appeal against any of these payments now: claimants only have 21 days to appeal against anything. It's probably, too late to get the new regulations changed as well. Jo Richardson MP has tabled a Prayer against instrument no.1141, but MPs are hardly likely to demand a debate and get it reversed. So when this year's increases are due, on 14 November, claimants will be robbed with the blessing of the law.

The DHSS explained to *The Leveller* that it would have been "very costly" to have altered their procedure to meet the two rulings. "It would have meant dealing with every claim individually." It can be very inconvenient, complying with one's obligations.

The Great Benefit Fraud of 15 November last year swindled claimants out of an estimated £4.25 million. The total swindled out of the DHSS in fraudulent claims in 1976 was £1.5 million.

DISCRETION

The power to be be really mean

OF 2.8 MILLION claimants on supplementary benefit at the end of 1975, nearly two-fifths were receiving discretionary additions to their regular weekly rate, and 17 per cent had received extra payments to meet special needs.

These figures, which have more than doubled in five years, are alarming even the Supplementary Benefits Commission. The Commission is worried at the increasing complexity of the profusion of different benefits, and has called for them to be streamlined. But the very need for these payments demonstrates the hopeless inadequacy of the basic rates, and the element of discretion makes it frighteningly easy for DHSS officials to refuse them. The payments involve rigorous means testing, and usually humiliating home visits.

There are hundreds of thousands of claimants who struggle to make do on their basic benefit without applying for extra payments. They scrimp and scrape on basic necessities (heating, clothing, decent food) and their dependents suffer.

Getting discretionary additions is not pleasant. If a claimant needs new clothes, officials will visit the home and examine what clothes they already have. If they're at all wearable—no payment.

SWINDLE

How the DHSS fiddles claimants

Social security claimants are scroungers and swindlers: so most people are led to believe. They would be surprised to learn that the biggest swindle in the system has been carried out by the DHSS itself: in two test cases this summer the Department has been proved to have been robbing claimants of sums estimated at more than £200 million.

Both cases related to the date on which benefit is paid. The DHSS was found to have been in breach of the 1966 Supplementary Benefits Act. For eleven years they had been ignoring the Act's instructions to pay benefit from the date of the original claim, and to pay out the annual increment on the date it comes into effect.

The ruling on the payment of original claims was made in the High Court on 20 July. It came from a person well known as a friend of the working class, the Lord Chief Justice Widgery. If Widgery could have found against the claimant, he would. But the Act is too clear. Widgery said: "There is nothing in the Act or the relevant regulations which cancel or obscures his right to payment from that date".

Claimants

If new furniture is required, the DHSS will insist that it be second-hand, and that the claimant goes round and collects several estimates, and presents them to the office, to make sure the state isn't swindled out of a few bob.

Most Exceptional Circumstances Additions to benefit are to cover heating, and housing costs, principally rent, in which case local offices have the power to set a maximum. In the London Borough of Brent, for instance, the limit is £5.50 a week. It is a pretty safe bet that there is not a single dwelling in Brent with a weekly rent of under £5.50.

Exceptional Need Payments—more than a million were made last year—cover clothing and household expenses, in the main.

In awarding all of them, local officials have discretion. The mood of the counter-supervisor can determine whether a claimant's family live at or below subsistence level. There is only one guiding principle for officials to go on: need must be proved, by the claimant. The initial assumption is that there is no need. If need is recognised, the DHSS have complete discretion on the amount, and on when they pay it.

Of course, discretion extends further: staff can decide whether a claimant should even receive the basic scale rate. They can "forget" to inform claimants of benefits they might be entitled to. When an unemployed claimant signs on, gets her or his "B1", and goes round to the DHSS, officials there will assume that the industrial misconduct rule has been applied by the Department of Employment, and will dock the scale by 40 per cent. The Department may decide that it does not apply (yes, this sometimes does happen), but there is no



procedure for the DHSS to be informed. The DHSS will assume that unemployment benefit has been suspended. The claimant will, of course, receive full unemployment benefit before long. But in the meanwhile the level of supplementary benefit will have been cut.

There are many DHSS workers who are sympathetic to claimants, and will often bend the rules in their favour. But there are many more who aren't. And they have all the power, the discretion, to be really mean.

Social security fraud totals approximately £1.5 million a year, and there are around 10,000 prosecutions a year.

Income tax evasion totals approximately £10 million a year, according to the Inland Revenue. In 1973, the last year for which figures are available, there were 163 prosecutions.

TRIBUNAL

Appeals procedure pitfalls all the way

IF THE PRACTICE of law in this country were to pass sentence first, and conduct the trial later, even the judges Argyll and Widgery would be in the spearhead of a reform campaign.

And yet this is the kind of justice that claimants have to struggle against in the Supplementary Benefits Appeals Tribunal. Thousands don't even realise that they have the right to challenge the DHSS's decision on their claims by appealing to a tribunal, and if they do, they are inhibited from translating it into action.

Every claimant receives notification of the appeals procedure open to him/her. About 5.7 million claims were made for supplementary benefit last year, and 2.9 million people were in receipt of some benefit, but the number of appeals was only 101,000. As one researcher in the field of tribunal representation and welfare rights put it: "I can't believe the other 2.8 million are completely happy. There is a need for the great mass of claimants to be educated to a greater awareness of their rights".

Of those who were aware and decided to fight the DHSS by lodging an appeal, only half—55,000—finally took their case to the Supplementary Benefit Appeals Tribunal—and fewer than one-fifth were successful.

What happened to rub out the opposition could be any of a number of things: the DHSS reviewing a decision, even in part, and voiding the appeal case; a visit to the appellant's home by DHSS enquirers; or the cost of travel to the tribunal centre, particularly restricting to the single parent family and the disabled. Travelling expenses are paid only after you reach the centre.

If the claimant survives that obstacle course they come face to face with the most immovable obstacle, the Tribunal itself. None of its three members is legally qualified. The Chairperson is a local worthy selected from a panel of regulars by the office of the Secretary of State. Of the other two, one is a nominee from the Trades Council, a 'worker representative', usually a local trade union official and also usually the most reactionary member of the panel. Those that prove too

sympathetic are not often asked back. The third member is another local worthy. With the panel is the Presenting Officer (a DHSS official) and a clerk.

There are no rules of procedure, and no force of precedent. The Presenting Officer can freely cast aspersions on the appellant's character and throw in details of their history with the local office—all of which would be totally inadmissible in a court of law.

The panel's verdict is meant to be a unanimous one but in practice the chair usually carries a disproportionate amount of weight. An unofficial complicity may have developed between the chair and the Presenting Officer through long periods of panel service together. But officially, this does not, of course, in any way affect the way in which the appellant is received.

There is no redress beyond the tribunal, except on a point of law, and that means a costly appeal to the High Court. Otherwise, the panel's deliberations are absolute.

A study of the tribunal system¹ by Kathleen Bell, Professor of Social Studies at Newcastle-upon-Tyne University, in 1974, recommended that representation of appellants should be encouraged, although not by solicitors. Some local authorities, independent community groups, Claimants Unions, and Citizens Advice Bureaux are taking up this role².

It also recommended that a higher body of appeal beyond the Supplementary Benefit Appeal Tribunal panel should be established and that the chairperson should be legally qualified. In National Insurance Appeal Tribunals, which deal with the whole social spectrum—and not just the poor—the chairperson must be a solicitor. Moves towards this in supplementary benefit appeals have been barely perceptible.

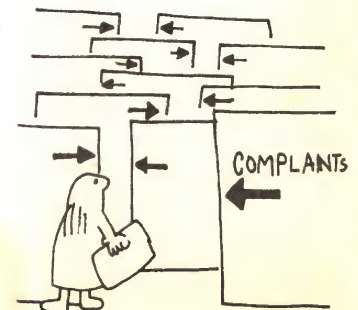
Pat Murray

1. October 1975 publication of *Research Study on Supplementary Benefit Appeals Tribunals: Review of Main Findings; Conclusions; Recommendations*.

2. *Welfare Advice and Advocacy—A Study of Current Provision in the NW Midlands* (Roger Lawrence, July 1977). Published by the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux.

THE AVERAGE "take-up" of supplementary benefits in 1975 was 75 per cent; that is, a quarter of the people whom the DHSS budgeted for as being eligible to claim didn't. The government thereby "saved" £240 million.

The supplementary benefit scheme that year cost less than £150 million to run in total. It therefore ran at a considerable profit, with enough left over for a couple of aircraft carriers, at least.





UNION

How claimants can fight back

CLAIMANTS FACING intransigent or actively hostile DHSS officials are on their own, and in their isolation are usually inhibited from persisting in their claim. The Claimants Union was set up to help them, and representing claimants is probably the most important work. But a recent court decision is hampering their capacity.

The CU and the DHSS never make any secret of their mutual hatred. The union has made use of aggressive tactics inside the offices: banging the counter, demanding the manager, and generally standing up for claimants' rights. Officials don't like this sort of thing, and matters came to a head in Batley, West Yorkshire, last year.

A CU representative accompanying a claimant was told to leave, or the interview would be terminated. The CU took the matter to court, and in a final judgment in the High Court in July, lost. The ruling was that the interview is a purely administrative procedure, and the court couldn't see how the claimant would benefit from being accompanied.

The DHSS responded happily. A circular was sent to all offices informing them of the ruling; most offices are now refusing to admit the more effective CU activists altogether, and although the ban is not total, it is invoked whenever things get awkward. In Oxford, the CU was shown the circular as evidence of its non-admission, and in Bristol DHSS officials have even tried to prevent a CU representative being present on home visits.

The CU can still, of course, represent claimants in tribunals, and in court. But the initial interview is the most important in determining what level of subsistence a claimant is going to achieve.

The other main handicap on the CU's work is the lack of support from the labour movement. When the number of unemployed is fast creeping up on the membership of the biggest trade union (the Transport and General, with 1.9 million), the voice of the claimant within the movement is scarcely even *molto pianissimo*. Earlier this year the TUC invited member unions to submit answers to a questionnaire on the operation of the Supplementary Benefit scheme, to help them frame evidence to the enquiry now being conducted within the DHSS. It did not ask the CU, since it is not affiliated. But the CU submitted a report unilaterally; a comprehensive document, which began by questioning the terms of reference of the questions, which it described as "biased and partial, and framed in such a way as to suggest solutions which, while appearing attractive on the surface, are based on a misconception of the reality facing claimants. More seriously, we note that many important areas are not touched at all."

The report went on to state its total opposition to the SB scheme, with its "degrading poverty and waste of human potential", and concludes with ten demands. These were: a guaranteed minimum income; abolition of discretionary powers; automatic lump-sum grants for

exceptional circumstances; the abolition of the industrial misconduct rule; an end to discrimination against women, particularly the cohabitation rule; abolition of home visits, unemployment review officers and liable relative officers; drastic reform of the appeal system; automatic written explanations for all claimants; abolition of re-establishment and reception centres; and the establishment of a complaints procedure.

True to form, the TUC's final submission to the DHSS, while it raised other, more specific points, met only two of these—and not, in particular, the minimum income proposal. And, again true to form, the TUC Congress at Blackpool threw out a call for a £50 minimum income even for *people in work*.

The Claimants Union, formed in Birmingham in 1968, is a loose federation of autonomous local unions. Any claimant, but only claimants, may join, and all members have equal rights in the thrice-annual national meeting. The CU is a totally non-structured democracy. The trade union movement, if it cared to, could learn a lot from it.

There are hundreds of Claimants Unions throughout the country. The full list is too long to print, and in any case changes quite frequently. To contact your local CU, first approach the co-ordinating union for your area. These are listed below, with the times of their weekly meetings.

London North and East

East London CU, Dame Colet House, Ben Jonson Road, London E1.

London South

Camberwell CU, Union Place, 122 Vassall Rd, London SW9 01-735 6123. Tues 2.30pm

London West

West London CU, The 510 Centre, 510 Harrow Road, London W10. 01-969 7437. Tues 7.30pm

South West

Bristol CU, 46 Richmond Rd, Bristol 6. 0272-40491. Tues 8pm at Dockland Settlement, City Rd., Bristol 2.

Midlands

Birmingham CU, The Action Centre, 134 Villa Road, Birmingham B19 1NN. 021-554 2080. Weds 1.30pm

North West

Longsight CU, 642 Stockport Rd, Manchester 13. 061-255 5111. Weds and Fri 10.30 to 4.30 at Longsight Law Centre, 595 Stockport Rd, Manchester 13. 061-248 6640.

North East

South Tyneside CU, The People's Place, Derby Terrace, South Shields, Tyne and Wear. 08943-565062. Weds 12.30 to 1.30 and Sat 11.00 to 1.00

Scotland

Glasgow CU, St Brides Centre, 19 Rosevale St, Partick, Glasgow 11. 041-339 7558 or 041-339 3293. Thurs 7.30

Wales

Swansea CU, 79 Brokesby Rd, Bon Y Mean, Swansea, West Glamorgan. Thurs 7.30pm at 10 Mount Pleasant St, City Centre, Swansea, West Glamorgan. 0792-462966.

Ireland

contact Birmingham CU.

Socialist theatre listings

The dates given are only those which have been confirmed at the time of going to press. Most companies are touring continuously; and if you are interested in a particular company or show then it may be worth while to ring or write the company to check other dates in their itinerary.

AVON TOURING THEATRE COMPANY

Deadwood
BRISTOL: Oct 22. Dockland Settlement, City Road.
BRISTOL: Oct 24. Oak House, Park Street.
BRISTOL: Oct 25, Nov 7. Bristol University Union.
BRISTOL: Nov 10. Filton Technical College.
BRISTOL: Nov 11. Bertray Lodge Youth Centre.

Face Value

GLOUCESTER: Oct 29. Robin Hood Club.
BRISTOL: Nov 6, Nov 8. Bristol University Union.
BRISTOL: Nov 3-4. Brillling Arts Centre.
YATE: Nov 18. South World Community Association.
Further details from Avon Touring Theatre Company, McArthur Warehouse, Gas Ferry Road, Bristol. (0272-20247).

BELT AND BRACES

A Day in the Life of the World
MANCHESTER: Oct 25-29. Liberty Theatre, St Peters Sq.

Not So Green As It's Cabbage
LONDON: Nov 11. Goldsmiths' College.

CORK (Ireland): Nov 14-26. Everyman Theatre.

Do Not Go Gentle
SHEFFIELD: Nov 19. Hurlfield Company.

BURY (Lancs): Nov 21-22. Arts Centre.
EXETER: Nov 30-Dec 1. St Lukes College.

Further details from Belt & Braces, 22 Vicars Road, NW5 (01-485 2872)

BROADSIDE MOBILE WORKERS THEATRE

Divide and Rule

LONDON: Oct 20. For the National Association for Multiracial Education, Institute for Education, Malet Street, London WC1.

Anyone interested in booking them ring 01-450 6992 or write to Broadside, 58 Holbein Place, London SW1 8NJ.

COUNTERACT

Prisons

Counteract Theatre Company with the support of Radical Alternatives to Prison (RAP) and PROP, the national prisoners' movement will be producing and performing a play about prisons. The play will aim to spark discussion about the role of prisons in society. If you want to book the play for dates after Jan 1, 1978 contact Counteract, 27 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1R 0AT (01-251 4977).

FOCO NOVO

The Elephant Man

DERBY: Oct 13-15. Playhouse Studio. 8pm.
WELWYN GARDEN CITY: Oct 19. Leisure Centre. 8pm.
CAMBRIDGE: Oct 21. College of Art & Technology, Mumford Theatre. 8pm.
NORWICH: Oct 22. Arts Centre. 8pm.
LANCASTER: Oct 24-26. Lancaster University, Nuffield Theatre. 8pm.
STOKE-ON-TRENT: Oct 27. Crewe & Alsager College. 8pm.
MANCHESTER: Oct 28-29. Leigh College, Contact Studio. 8pm.
LONDON: Nov 3-26. Hampstead Theatre, Swiss Cottage. 8pm.
Foco Novo: 2 Nugent Terrace, London NW8 (01-289 3226/286 6502).

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

Kiss and Kill

BOSTON: Oct 28-29. Blackfriars Arts Centre.

Floorshow

GRANTHAM: Oct 31. Marco's Social Club.
BIRMINGHAM: Nov 5. AUEW (TASS) Womens Conference, Grand Hotel.

BRACKNELL: Nov 10-12. Southill Park Arts Centre.

Nov 18-19. North West Arts Association—details from Rosemary Heesam 061-833 9471.

Nov 23-27. Merseyside Arts Association—details from Penny Phillips 051-709 0671.

MUTABLE THEATRE

Mother Country

LONDON: Oct 24-28. The Rock Garden. 1.15pm (01-240 3961).
LONDON: Nov 24. Iseldon Teachers Centre. 2pm.
LONDON: Nov 28. Vauxhall Manor Upper School. 1pm.
LONDON: Dec 1. Hainault Settlement. 8pm.
Touring schools, youth clubs, and community centres in and around London. Contact: 01-701 6710.

NORTH WEST SPANNER

Jubileations (Cabaret Show)

MANCHESTER: Nov 5. University of Manchester. 1pm.

New show, as yet untitled.

MANCHESTER: Nov 13. Moss Side Sport & Social Club, Westward Street, Moss Side, Manchester. Lunchtime.
MANCHESTER: Nov 13. '68 Club. 8.30pm.

MANCHESTER: Nov 30. Francis Shaw Social Club, Corbett Street, Manchester 11.
YORKSHIRE: Nov 19-28. Tour—ring for further details.

Ring Maureen Ramsay (061-881 7845) or Mossley 4627.

RECREATION GROUND

Black and Blue

LONDON: Oct 25. Bar Lounge, City University, EC1. 1.30pm.
LONDON: Oct 28-29. Stage 1, Community Centre, Denary Road, E
LONDON: Nov 12. University of

London Union, Knight Street. (Camden Against Racism—One day TU Conference). 7.30pm.

Dates as yet unconfirmed:

LONDON: Week beginning Oct 31.
LONDON: Week beginning Nov 14.
YORKSHIRE: Week beginning Nov 21.
Ring for details (01-722 7334).

7.84 THEATRE COMPANY (England)

The Life and Times of Joe England

WICKFORD: Nov 1. Community Centre, Wickford, Essex.
BILLERICAY: Nov 2. Archer Hall, Billericay, Essex.
BASILDON: Nov 3. Barnett Centre, Ghyllgrove.
BASILDON: Nov 4/5. Roundacre Youth Centre.

SIDEWALK THEATRE

Son of a Gun

This play pieces together the story of Brenda Stanton from a nine-year-old 'maladjusted' school girl in 1957, to her squatting in an empty London house with two other women in 1970. To do this the three women/three man company takes on just over forty characters in the space of a couple of hours.

The play follows through these thirteen years and shows the impossibility of people relating equally in a society founded on the principles of inequality. Brenda is working class, lesbian, female and young which puts her on the rough end of four major inequalities in our society. Initially she experiences these inequalities as confusing, painful conflicts with the people around her: her parents, her teacher, her husband, her lovers. Ultimately she sees them for what they are, the imposed conditions of the society she lives in.

Ring Sidewalk on 01-226 5059 or 01-249 3066 to check dates.

GLASGOW: Nov 1. Eastleigh

7.84 Theatre Company (England) in a scene from Trembling Giant



Womens Group, Eastleigh Technical College, Eastleigh

GLASGOW: Oct 26-28.

Strathclyde University Theatre, 126 Ingram Street. 8pm
EASTLEIGH: Nov 1. Eastleigh Womens Group, Eastleigh Technical College, Eastleigh, Hants. 8pm.

SOUTHAMPTON: Nov 2. Southampton Womens Group, Southampton College of Art. 8pm.

BRIGHTON: Nov 3. Brighton Womens Group, Shoreham Youth Arts Workshop, The Barn, St Julians Lane, Shoreham-by-Sea. 8pm.

WINCHESTER: Nov 4. Winchester Womens Group, Tower Arts Centre, Romsey Road, Winchester, Hants. 8pm.

WOMENS THEATRE GROUP

The Women's Theatre Group works as a collective, taking shows about political issues seen from a woman's point of view to schools, trade union meetings, youth clubs and community centres.

Our work has included **My Mother Said, I Never Should**, which dealt with sexual problems of teenagers, and society's double standards on the sex lives of boys and girls; **Work to Role**, dealing with the problems and contradictions facing girls when they leave school, and the experience of work;

Out on the Costa del Trico, currently touring, which is intended to celebrate and broadcast the most important equal pay strike since the Equal Pay Act became law; and **Pretty Ugly**, a new show with music, available from Nov 18. It is intended for 12 to 15-year-olds and looks at the contradictory images thrust upon teenagers by the friends, parents and the media.

Bookings are invited; contact address, 27 Stepney Grove, London E1. (01-790 7649 or 01-226 4243)

Representation of Claimants' Interests

From time to time doubts have arisen over the Commission's policy on the representation of claimants' interests in local offices. The Chairman of the SBC has recently given the views of the Commission on the place of advocacy in the consideration of claimants' cases to the National Federation of Claimants' Unions. The following is a summary of the points made in that letter.

As the Commission said in their last Annual Report claimants are entitled to be represented in their dealings with the Commission, just as they would have trade union support in negotiating with employers. The Commission also recognise that the presence of a representative or adviser can help the Department's officers to ensure that claimants get their proper entitlement. As long as the representatives, whether individuals or members of organisations such as the Claimants' Union, behave in an orderly and constructive manner the Department is always ready to co-operate in ensuring that the claimants get what they are entitled to in the first place and in reviewing any decision which is represented as being incorrect or inadequate. But the Commission must refuse representation in those few instances where a representative behaves quite unreasonably. In our view the creation of a legal right to representation would be neither desirable or practicable, but there should be no mystery about the way we intend to use the discretion we have in this area—hence the paragraph in the Annual Report.

The Commission believe that representatives and advocates should take the

trouble to understand the rules that local office staff have to apply and the evidence needed in cases in which they are involved; and should discourage claimants from misleading social security staff in any way. In return the staff should keep them informed about the Commission's policies, rules and procedures. If claimants or their advisers are dissatisfied with decisions they should first ask local offices to look into these cases again. If still dissatisfied they should then feel entitled to appeal and be able to pursue the argument as far as they wish without personal rancour between them and the Department's officers.

Relationships of this kind between claimants and their advocates on the one hand and social security staff on the other cannot be imposed from above. They have to be built up across the counters of social security offices and between colleagues in different agencies. Claimants' Union spokesmen, welfare rights officers and many others have achieved that kind of relationship with staff where each has taken the trouble to win the other's professional respect and personal trust. This, however, is not always the case and the Commission are very concerned to ensure that the staff are not subjected to unreasonable pressures and that the service to other claimants is not endangered by disruptive behaviour. Undue pressure as distinct from reasoned argument can serve only to alienate the staff and jeopardise the common aim of creating an atmosphere of co-operation. Staff should be able to work in an atmosphere free from abuse and intimidation and, indeed, there is a responsibility on the Commission and Department to ensure that they can do so.

Annual Report of the SBC (£4.15, 260 pages) says that "claimants are supposed to be treated with courtesy in clean comfortable offices, and good relations should be promoted between staff, claimants, social workers and claimants' union representatives."

Secret code for 'workshy'

THE NOTORIOUS AX Code — the Department of Social Security's secret manual for officials concerned with suspected 'fraud' by claimants — breaches fundamental elements of employment protection law. The latest addition to the Code covers 'claimants who fail to take the chance of a job'. A copy has fallen into *The Leveler's* hands.

CLAIMANTS WHO have failed to take work, and are deemed 'workshy', can have their Supplementary Benefit cut, and ultimately be prosecuted for 'failing to maintain themselves and their dependents'.

Circular AX/44, the new addition to the AX Code, spells out what the trained eye of the Employment Review Officer (ERO) can detect as the tell-tale sign that a claimant is not really trying hard enough to get work.

Of the ten criteria, printed right down, could conclusively prove work shyness, and of least two — numbers 7 and 8 — are illegal.

The provisions of the Redundancy Payments Act 1965 (now consolidated in the Employment Protection (Consolidation) Act 1978) establish the right of a worker to refuse an alternative job. On two main grounds: that the alternative is not comparable to the last job, and secondly that domestic circumstances make the alternative (for instance, different hours) difficult. And there have been many Industrial Tribunal cases in which workers who turned down an offer, and were refused their redundancy, have won it back.

But for the DHSS, workers in this position can forfeit their benefit.

Similarly, there is a body of case law that negates number 8. It is a time-honoured principle of the (Common) Law of Contract, that both sides must be amenable to any change in its terms. Even when there is no written contract of employment, the law regards any agreement over work as the same thing. So the employer cannot unilaterally alter the terms or conditions of employment. This too is consolidated in the 1978 Act.

This does not worry the DHSS. As far as they are concerned, employers can do what they like, and if workers prefer to leave — cut their SB!

The same consideration covers number 1: in law, let alone politics, you cannot 'impose unreasonable conditions' in negotiating the terms of a contract, because a contract cannot be agreed until both sides accept the terms.

Circular AX/44 (issued on February 9 this year) is saying: we back the bosses. If they offer some lousy job, 'take it, or leave it', you've got to take it. It is part of a swing of power

For official use only

Circular AX/44

CLAIMANTS WHO FAIL TO TAKE THE CHANCE OF A JOB

Introduction

1. New procedures have recently been agreed with the Department of Employment and the Manpower Services Commission for obtaining decisions and opinions from the IO in respect of claimants who fail to take the chance of a suitable job. This

3. A claimant should be regarded as having failed to take the chance of a job if he could reasonably have been expected to know of a specific job and failed, refused or neglected either to apply for, or accept it, or failed to attend an interview in connection with obtaining the job. Some examples of this type of conduct are given below but the list is not exhaustive.

- (1) imposing unreasonable conditions on the acceptance of a job;
- (2) refusing to give references or allow references to be taken up;
- (3) delaying acceptance of a job until the vacancy has otherwise been filled;
- (4) creating an unfavourable impression at an interview with an employer, eg by being deliberately obstructive, apathetic or appearing to be under the influence of alcohol;
- (5) failing to attend an interview with an employer;
- (6) failing to return to work on the day agreed for general resumption following a stoppage of work or period of short-time working;
- (7) failing to take a job offered as an alternative to redundancy;
- (8) failing to continue in a job when the employer varies the terms or conditions of employment;
- (9) refusing the job offered;
- (10) accepting a job but failing to start work on the agreed date.

towards employers that has accompanied increasing unemployment.

Now, who knows, a Tory government might just be inclined to help this process along a little. One direction it might take has already been provided, by a working party of senior DHSS mandarins who produced a 'Review' of the Supplementary Benefit scheme last year.

(Another working party, set up by the Claimants Union, has produced a counter-review, which effects a thorough demolition of the whole thing, and proposes an alternative welfare scheme based on a guaranteed minimum income. Copies are available from the East London Claimants Union, Dame Colet House, Ben Jonson Road, London E1; price £1, or 50p for claimants).

The DHSS review suggested two options for a future legal

structure for SB: one was a new Act of Parliament, under which the secret codes would become statutory regulations, carrying the force of law, unchallengeable in the courts of tribunals. The second alternative was a Code of Conduct covering the granting of benefits. Though less rigid than legislation, it would still reduce claimants' ability to challenge officials' rulings.

Although the review preferred the second, the first would still be on the cards if the Tories wanted to try it.

Another vicious scheme the Tories are considering is 'notional strike pay'. This is a scheme to cut the payment of SB to strikers' dependents, which is a real problem for Tory leaders: they have to satisfy the baying for workers' blood that comes from their most raucous supporters, yet they realise they can't actually abolish it. Instead,

the idea is to assume officially that all strikers are paid a set rate of strike pay by their unions, to count this as income, and disallow benefit accordingly.

Most affected, of course, would be the lowest-paid workers. Low pay will be kept low. This is a very pure strain of Thatcherism, almost aesthetic in its meanness, hit the weak, hit the poor, and hard!

Really, Labour's been no better, despite the employment protection laws born from the TUC honeymoon of 1974/5: the plight of the poor has increased, with the number of people living below the official (DHSS) poverty line increasing from 806,000 to 2 million in the years 1977-8. And in the case of the secret codes, Labour ministers have managed to break two election pledges at once: by also refusing to lift the secret codes protecting them.

On March 26 Social Security minister, Stan Orme, former Tribune, and now, on the election hustings, probably a Tribune again, wrote an article in *The Guardian*, which attempted tortuously to justify both the alleged commitment to open government, and the need to keep his department's procedures secret.



Stan Orme

He wrote: 'Does the DHSS believe in open government? Yes. Does this mean there should be open access to our files? No ...

'So why do we protect these (regulations)? Many could be made available, but there are some it would be self-defeating for us to reveal: the instructions, for example, on how to avoid and detect fraud ...

Guardian readers must have been puzzled. What was the man talking about? There was no mention of the AX Code by name. If even its existence can't be acknowledged — what kind of commitment to open government (which in any case is a contradiction in terms) is that?

But there was more than a name to hide, wasn't there, Stan?

Tim Gopill



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SECURITY

Dear Sir or Madam

The Supplementary Benefits Commission have considered your claim but have decided that in your present circumstances a payment of benefit should not be made.

Sproat accused of scrounging

THE M.P. who led a campaign against social security spongers was yesterday accused of being a "scrounger."

The Commons attack against Aberdeen Tory M.P. Iain Sproat came from Mr. Dennis Skinner (Labour, Bolsover).

He said: "There has been a continued breaking of the law by company directors who have failed to send in adequate returns."

"Is it not outrageous that a Tory M.P. has set up eight companies in the past three or four years and has failed to send in returns?"

"Is it not ironic that this law-breaker and property speculator is none other than Mr. Iain Sproat—a scrounger himself."

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	1965	1974	1975
Retirement Pension (including Old Persons' Pension)	6,357,000	8,072,000	8,243,000
Widows' Benefit	593,000	528,000	509,000
Guardians' Allowance	5,000	5,000	5,000
Attendance Allowance	—	115,000	126,000
Higher rate	—	65,000	90,000
Lower rate	—	444,000	452,000
Invalidity Pension	—	366,000	373,000
Invalidity Allowance	—	224,000	224,000
Lower rate	—	72,000	74,000
Middle rate	—	70,000	75,000
Higher rate	—	203,000	203,000
Industrial Injuries Benefits	199,000	31,000	—
Disability Pension	26,000	—	—
Widows' Pension	—	—	—
Supplementary Benefits	1,420,000**	1,807,000	2,793,000
Supplementary Pension	577,000**	873,000	1,113,000
Supplementary Allowance	—	70,000	60,000
Family Income Supplement	—	—	—
War Pensions	—	—	—
Disability Pension	448,000	333,000	321,000
Widows and other Dependents' Pension	166,000	114,000	109,000

† Did not exist in 1965.
 * Not available at time of going to print.
 ** The figures for 1965 relate to the number of people above and below pension age who were in receipt of national assistance.

• Cmnd. 6001, April 1975; Cmnd. 6247, September 1975. HMSO.
 † Order by Her Majesty, Cmnd. 6002 and Cmnd. 6246.
 * Order in Council of 18 March 1975 and September 1975.
 † Personal Injuries (Civilian) (Amendment) Scheme 1975 (SI 1975 No. 392); the Personal Injuries (Civilian) (Amendment) (No. 2) Scheme 1975 (SI 1975 No. 1518).

